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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine and describe the cultural knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and actions of children in a classroom as they acquire and apply reading skills. Subjects, 26 fourth and fifth graders and their teacher in one elementary classroom, were observed during reading and social studies instruction over a period of 4 months and were also interviewed by the researcher. Two open-ended questions were addressed: (1) What overt behaviors did the children engage in while working on reading activities? and (2) What do children verbalize about their individual perspectives of reading, reading instruction, and the application of reading skills in a content area, social studies? The children's perspectives were grouped into three distinct categories based on their knowledge, understanding, and ability to read as demonstrated in the classroom. Six "appliers" identified reading skills, defined or described the content of the identified skills, used reading skills to participate in reading group discussions, and independently applied the skills when reading for pleasure. Seventeen "tacit appliers" applied reading skills but were incapable of describing those skills. Three "nonappliers" could neither identify nor use reading skills. All the children in the classroom did observe each other in terms of reading ability and established criteria for each other similar to the teacher's. These results imply that a classroom of children should be considered as a specific number of distinct individuals and not as a whole group for instructional purposes. (JL)

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Children's Insights into Reading Instruction - An Ethnography

Roger G. Eldridge, Jr.

The cultural knowledge, beliefs, ideas, and actions, children possess concerning reading and reading instruction has been neglected as a rich source of information by reading educators. That is, reading educators have failed to ask children whether or how they perceive and understand the reading process and classroom reading instruction. Numerous researchers have focused their study on the teacher and his/her delivery of instruction as a means of trying to explain the teaching and learning of reading. Even more numerous have been the researchers who have relied upon student outcomes, as measured by standardized tests, to explain various aspects of the reading process.

The discovery of the inhabitants' cultural knowledge is important for two reasons. First, when the inhabitants' cultural knowledge is known, that is the processes they employ to teach and learn reading, instruction can be designed to meet the learning needs of the inhabitants. Also information can be provided which would help children better understand the content and purpose of reading instruction. A second reason for discovering cultural knowledge is related to the implementation of educational programs. Investigators have found that success in the implementation of reading innovations and other educational programs is dependent on the perspective of the teacher (Fullan & Pomfret, 1976). Therefore, in order to attain maximum potential for teaching the content of reading, the content should be consonant with the teacher's perspective. That is, when the teacher's perspective and knowledge of read-

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ing differs from what is offered in a reading program, the program is usually adopted or abandoned (Berman & MacLaughlin, 1976). Consequently, a discovery and understanding of cultural knowledge is essential for recommending changes in methods and materials to improve instruction.

The descriptions and information, about the children's cultural knowledge of reading, contained in this presentation are part of a larger study (Eldridge, 1981). The purpose of the study was to decover, examine, and interpret the classroom inhabitant's cultural knowledge and to identify some of the contextual factors associated with reading instruction. The study was designed and conducted to allow for the unlimited observation and description of the inhabitants' actions, beliefs, interactions, and activities which were revealed during the teaching, learning and applying of reading skills. In this regard, research questions of a general nature were posed to focus attention upon the varied activities and interactions of all the classroom inhabitants. The study was conducted in one elementary school classroom occupied by twenty-six fourth and fifth grade children and the classroom teacher. The data were collected via daily observations of reading and social studies instruction over a four month period. In addition to the observations, interviews were conducted with the classroom inhabitants.

THE CHILDRENS' CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

The purpose of this presentation is to focus on the children's cultural knowledge of reading and reading instruction. That is, to

explore the children's insights and understandings as they received reading instruction. Two open-ended questions for discovering the children's cultural knowledge were addressed. First, what overt behaviors did the children engage in while working on reading activities? The objective in raising this question was to seek an understanding of the children's actions and interactions as they attempted to improve their reading abilities. Two factors which appear to affect the children's actions and interactions were considered. First, specific environmental factors which impinge upon children as they act and react to various situations within the classroom, school and community needed to be identified. Too often environmental factors are considered incidental and of little relevance in the discovery of children's knowledge of reading. Likewise, the children's strategies for communicating, completing assignments, and using the reading skills they learned were considered. The strategies children employ are influenced not only by instructional approaches but also by classroom organizations, rules for classroom behavior, social friendships, and other contextual factors. The second question raised was: What do the children verbalize about their individual perspectives of reading, reading instruction, and the application of reading skills in a content area, social studies? The purpose of this question was to obtain first-hand reports from the children about their beliefs, ideas, and actions regarding reading and social studies instruction.

A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

A child's perspective of reading is composed of a set of personally coordinated explicit as well as tacit beliefs, ideas, and actions. These elements of behavior are present as each child interacts with a teacher and/or other children in problematic learning and social situations which occur within a classroom setting. A child's perspective of learning to read then is formed from his/her total knowledge and understanding of the setting, the content of the educational curriculu, and the social relationships which are established within the bounds of a particular classroom and school. Moreover, a child brings to a classroom specific knowledge and certain predispositions to learn to read which are acquired as a result of living and interacting with other inhabitants within the home and community. In fact, each environment to which a child is exposed contributes to his/her knowledge base and overall perspective of reading.

Several factors or situations affect the formation of a child's perspective of reading. Some of the factors are:

- the child's academic and social background as well as his/her academic and social position within the classroom setting.
- the child's ability to understand, describe, and characterize the content and the processes/ procedures of learning to read.
- the child's representation and understanding of the formation, organization and management of reading groups and other classroom grouping arrangements.
- the child's application of reading skills in the content areas of the curriculum.

- the child's representation and understanding of the formation, organization and management of reading groups and other classroom grouping arrangements.
- the child's application of reading skills in the content areas of the curriculum.
- the child's development and employment of specific criteria to evaluate his/her own learning in the classroom.
- the child's development of criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of the beliefs, ideas and actions of other children and the classroom teacher.

Children are guided in the formation of their perspectives on learning to read by several different teachers during the span of five or six years at the elementary school level. That is, children often are exposed to very different perspectives of learning to read based upon the knowledge, philosophical beliefs, and attitudes of individual classroom teachers. Often processes and procedures utilized by one teacher to deliver reading instruction are counter-productive in terms of helping children form perspectives because the children have already begun to develop perspectives based on instruction received from another teacher. For example, a teacher may base his/her reading instruction upon the children's oral reading of various basal reader stories and the completion of accompanying workbook pages and worksheets. Children exposed to these activities associate learning to read with the completion of these activities. Children exposed to the daily activity of round-robin reading tend to associate the processes and procedures of reading with oral reading. That is, children believe reading occurs only when reading is performed orally. Likewise, children exposed to

the daily use of workbook materials tend to associate reading with "completing the workbook exercises." In similar instances, many children view reading as providing the one word answers to complete the questions in the workbooks. Children exposed to the recurrent fill-in-the-blanks activities often identify the classroom reading time as only that time reserved to complete the workbook exercises.

On the other hand, some teachers organize their reading instruction around an open give and take discussion of story content between the teacher and several children. A basal reader story the children have read is usually the theme upon which the discussion is based. Children involved with discussing the content of a story with their teacher often speak of reading as "communication." That is, reading is explained as the exchange of words and ideas between the story's author and the readers. Moreover, many of these children identify reading time as any time they read whether they read a library book, a basal story, or an assigned text. Consequently, a child's perspective is molded by the beliefs, ideas, and actions of the classroom teacher for the periods of time the child is taught by that particular teacher. A child's previous experiences, therefore, influences the development of his/her perspective of learning to read.

Since teachers are deemed to be integral factors in the development of children's reading perspectives caution must be exercised by teachers in the methods and procedures they use to teach reading. Procedures and methods which appear to be of little value in enhancing children's reading abilities, such as round-robin reading, should be

avoided. Likewise, over emphasis on the completion of workbook pages at the expense of group discussion of story contents should be avoided. Workbook assignments often have very little relevance to the ability to read and understand the content of a basal story. These two procedures should be avoided because children exposed repeatedly to these procedures begin to view reading as round-robin reading or completing workbook exercises and not as a process of enhancing one's knowledge and view of the world.

CATEGORIES OF READERS

Within the classroom under study, various perspectives of reading existed. The teacher had developed a perspective and understanding of what should be taught relative to reading and how he wanted to teach the content he felt important for the children to learn. Although the teacher's perspective is important that is not the focus of this paper. Each child after four or five years in elementary school had developed an understanding of what constituted the process of reading and had a view of the reading instruction he/she received. Some of the elements of each child's perspective were shared with other children in the classroom. Three distinct views of reading emerged, however. For purposes of identification, discussion, and explanation the children's perspectives were grouped into three distinct categories. Each category of reader was identified based on the individual's knowledge, understanding, and ability to read as demonstrated within the classroom. A close scrutiny of each category may reveal some anomalies. The intent here, however, is to identify the general perspectives of the individuals

as regards their cultural knowledge of reading. The three categories of readers are: (1) appliers; (2) tacit appliers; and (3) non-appliers.

An applier was a child who identified reading skills, defined or described the content of the identified skills, used the reading skills to complete reading assignments and to participate in reading group discussions, and independently applied the skills when reading for pleasure. Six children were identified as appliers. The classroom teacher stated that each applier read "well above grade level." Also, the teacher's subjective evaluation was that all the appliers "progressed and not stayed the same or gone down" in reading during the school year.

Each applier possessed the above abilities even though the teacher never used the term "skill" or defined the various reading skills in the classroom. For example, one applier, Lezlie, talked about "saying things in your own words." Although the teacher never mentioned the skill by its proper name, Lezlie recognized paraphrasing as an important skill of reading. As another example, Paul defined getting the main idea of a story as telling "mainly what happens in a chapter . . . or story." Each applier identified reading skills, defined the content of the skills and used the skills to complete his/her reading assignments, other classroom work, and independent readings without help from the teacher. The appliers were very independent as regards the employment of the knowledge they possessed about reading. In addition, the appliers were prolific readers of both classroom materials and outside materials. They indicated that they liked to read both for acquiring information

and for the "fun-of-it." The appliers also indicated that their parents encouraged them to read at home "before bedtime and during free time."

A tacit applier was an individual possessing the following characteristics. A tacit applier was unable to name a reading skill on his/her own. When a reading skill was identified for the tacit applier, he/she indicated that he/she had heard of the skill before. But, the tacit applier was incapable of describing the skill or ascribing meaning to the skill beyond the recognition of the skill's name. The most perplexing characteristic of a tacit applier, however, was his/her ability to use and to apply the skills of reading with consistent regularity to complete reading and content area assignments. The classroom teacher identified the tacit appliers' reading progress in the following way: "I'm pleased with the performance. I think a lot of them have learned to answer questions that involve some thinking..." Seventeen children were identified as tacit appliers.

The evidence that each tacit applier was in fact using and applying reading skills was plentiful. All of the tacit appliers were reading in basal reader text levels that were above their actual grade levels. Each tacit applier had successfully completed more than three basal reader text levels within the classroom reading program during the school year. In addition, each tacit applier had passed the workbook skill assessment exercises appropriate for each reading text level completed. During reading group discussion sessions, each tacit applier answered questions posed by the teacher that probed beyond the

literal level of comprehension. That is, each tacit applier made inferences from the text stories, provided evaluation of the stories, and exhibited an understanding and appreciation for the characters in the stories and the author's effort in writing the story. Finally, each tacit applier had completed reading assignments in the content areas and actively participated in questioning and discussing the materials and ideas read.

The third category of reader, the non-applier, was identified in the following way. A non-applier was unable to name or identify any specific reading skill. Also, a non-applier was incapable of defining or describing a reading skill. Even when a reading skill was identified for the non-applier, each non-applier claimed that he/she had never heard of the skill before and did not know how or when to use the skill. Finally, non-appliers were unable to apply reading skills either in their basal text reading assignments or in reading assignments in the content areas of the curriculum. Three children were identified as non-appliers in the classroom.

Sufficient evidence was available to indicate that the three children were non-appliers. The classroom teacher described the progress of each non-applier as "very minimal." Each non-applier was reading more than one year below his/her actual grade level. The average number of basal reader text levels completed during the year by the non-appliers was two. Children reading at grade level usually completed a minimum of three basal reader texts each year. The non-appliers were unable to complete the workbook skill exercises without extensive teach-

er direction and assistance. The non-appliers were incapable of sustaining any type of discussion concerning the text stories they read. Most of the answers provided, by the non-appliers were one word answers even when the questions asked required elaboration beyond one word. Also, the non-appliers were often unable to complete their assignments in the content areas. They seldom, if ever, participated in content area discussions instead preferring to sit on the outer circle of the discussion groups. During independent reading time, non-appliers were seldom observed reading a book or magazine but were either paging through the pictures of a book or trying to complete their regular reading assignments.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

Some characteristics, as pertains to children's understanding of reading and reading instruction in the classroom, were common to each category of reader. That is, the children in all three categories possessed these same characteristics as regards their understanding of reading. For example, the children recognized that the teacher formed the various reading groups (nine) based primarily on the individual scores from reading tests given at the beginning of the school year. That is, the children expressed the knowledge that children who attained similar test scores were grouped together for reading instruction. The children did not identify any specific skill needs common to all children within a group but the children did assume all the members of one reading group had similar reading abilities.

In conjunction with the knowledge about grouping processes, each child was able to identify his/her classmate who "experienced the most difficulty in reading." The children based their evaluations upon two factors. The first was the text level in the reading program that was assigned to each child. They reasoned that the lowest level reader was assigned to the poorest reader. The second factor the children used was each child's demonstrated ability to read orally. The child experiencing the most difficulty reading orally was identified by the children as the poorest reader in the class. They also considered the frequency which a child was asked by the teacher to read orally as an indication of poor reading ability. In fact the teacher stated that the child who read orally most frequently to him was the child who needed the most help in reading. From each situation the children assimila ted specific information for viewing reading group formation based on the actions of the teacher.

In like manner, the children identified the "best" reader in the classroom. Although the children lacked consensus in selecting a specific individual who read the best they did express the unanimous opinion that one of the children in the applier category was the "best" reader. Two criteria were used by the children to evaluate the "best" reader. The first was the ability of a child to read orally "without making lots of mistakes." In general, the children agreed that being able to identify and pronounce the words was an important characteristic to be considered when selecting the best reader. The second criterion the children used to select the best reader was the frequency

and number of books a child read outside of the reading group sessions. For example, Lezlie was identified by some children as the best reader "because she is always reading a book." Other children selected Monica as the best reader because she "reads and often rereads the same story to get the story better." Children also stated that Monica was often reading in class when she was directed to complete work in other subject areas.

The above characteristics show that children did observe each other as regards the ability to read in the classroom. Also, the children established criteria for evaluating each other and the criteria was very similar to that used by the teacher to evaluate each child's performance in reading. In other content areas, the children were unable to explain how the work groups were arranged. In addition the children had not devised methods for evaluating abilities of individuals as they worked in content areas.

Another characteristic common to the perspectives of all the children was the use of workbook exercises as an integral aspect of reading instruction. The children viewed the workbook exercises as integral only in terms of time spent in reading. The children considered the workbook exercises of little importance in the process of learning to read or even to practice their reading skills. The children explained that one reason for their belief was that the teacher spent almost no time explaining or reviewing the workbook exercises. The children viewed the teacher's indifference toward the workbook exercises as a sign that the workbook exercises were unimportant in

the process of learning to read. The children also expressed the idea that the workbook exercises were unimportant in the process of learning to read because the exercises had little relevance to the stories the children were assigned to read. The children claimed the exercises could be completed without the benefit of information from the story. In fact all but one child stated that they completed their workbook exercises before beginning to read the assigned text stories.

The above are some elements of cultural knowledge the children in the classroom held in common about reading and reading instruction. The next task is to present the beliefs, ideas, and actions of children in each category of reader. To accomplish this goal, the perspectives of specific children within a category will be presented.

THE APPLIER'S PERSPECTIVE

As previously stated the appliers were considered the best readers in the classroom. They were not reading in the basal reader system, but they were assigned to read various library books for the reading group discussion sessions. During the reading group sessions they discussed the books together. Two of the books read by the appliers were The Yearling and Caddie Woodlawn. The perspectives of three appliers are presented below. These perspectives were selected because they are representative of all the appliers. The reading perspectives of the appliers were very different from the perspectives of the children in the other categories of readers.

Each applier defined reading as comprehension and talked about reading as the discussion of ideas. Josh, for example, defined reading as "comprehension and knowing how to find out things and thinking creatively." Paul explained reading as "reading comprehension. . . understanding the words and ideas of the story." Paul explained that the teacher asked questions during the discussion sessions for two reasons. First, questions were asked to check on whether or not the children had read the story. Paul indicated that the only way the teacher knew who had or had not read the story was through the answering of questions. Second, Paul explained that the teacher asked questions to ascertain "what you feel about things." According to Paul, the children's answers provided the teacher with an understanding of how the children felt and this helped the teacher to understand the children in the classroom.

The appliers viewed their reading assignments as being different from the rest of the class members because they read library books. They believed library books were assigned "because he (the teacher) thought that those reader books (basal readers) are too easy for us." Josh stated that "the stories might be good for us, but the workbook stuff would be too easy for us." Josh claimed this to be so because the appliers "essentially know everything in the workbook." The appliers claimed that reading things appealing to them was important for them to perform well.

The appliers also talked about reading as the use of reading skills. Heather explained that stories were assigned to "help you read better." Each applier was able to list and explain reading skills

such as placing things in sequence, getting the main idea, making comparisons, selecting facts, and understanding characters' feelings and personalities. After listing some of the skills, Josh added that the skills were taught "for the comprehension and so you understand . . . life."

The reading skills listed by the appliers were the same skills they claimed they used in social studies activities. For example, Josh after defining the skill of making comparisons added that in social studies "we make comparisons about how the colonists lived in the New World and how they lived in England." Heather stated that the types of questions and tasks required in social studies work were identical to those requested during reading group sessions. The appliers, therefore, were able to see continuity between the teaching of reading skills and the application of those same skills in a content area.

In summary, the appliers viewed reading as a series of skills that were useful in content areas in addition to reading discussion sessions. The appliers had a good understanding of the content of reading, the skills and their use, and the value of reading within the culture. The appliers were also very able to talk about the processes and procedures involved in learning to read. The appliers developed an understanding and expertise in spite of the fact that the teacher provided the appliers with little direct instruction or explanation of the reading skills or processes. The prime task of the teacher when working with the appliers was to develop within the appliers an interest in the materials being read. The teacher also attempted to have the appliers

develop their skills of thinking and analyzing what had been read in relation to the children's views of the world.

THE TACIT APPLIER'S PERSPECTIVE

The tacit appliers were children who were incapable to naming a reading skill or appropriately describing the content or defining the meaning of a reading skill. But, tacit appliers were capable to applying reading skills to complete their assignments in reading and social studies. The tacit appliers showed their reading abilities as they were reading in basal text levels above their actual grade levels. In addition, the tacit appliers were able to complete successfully their assignments in social studies. The views of two children, representative of the tacit appliers category, are presented below.

One child, Andrea, viewed reading as being able to say the words "with expression." Andrea equated reading with the ability of an individual to read orally. All of the tacit appliers held a similar view. Andrea also expressed concern that knowing the meanings of words was important. Gini, another tacit applier, expressed a similar concern that understanding the vocabulary in readings was the important element of reading. The tacit appliers, in general, unlike the appliers, had as the focus of their understanding of the processes of reading words and not the assimilation and generation of ideas. For example, comprehension or understanding of facts or story content were not discussed by the children during any of the individual interviews.

The tacit appliers indicated that questions asked by the teacher were the primary way the teacher discovered who knew or did not know

the meanings of the words from the readings. Knowledge of the meanings, according to the tacit appliers, helped children to gain an understanding of the story. Gini maintained that "understanding concepts" was important in the process of learning to read.

An element in learning to read envisioned by the tacit appliers was the use of "extra assignments" by the teacher. Extra assignments were tasks the teacher assigned the children such as the illustrations activity. To complete this activity the children were to select a sentence from the story text to accompany each picture provided in the story. Andrea explained that extra assignments were given by the teacher "to see if we know what goes on in the story." Andrea and the other tacit appliers maintained that the pictures in most stories did not help them to gain an understanding of the meaning of the story. Gini indicated that as she read a story she would "form images" in her own mind to represent the events in the story. She claimed that her images helped her more than the illustrations provided by the author.

Most of the tacit appliers reported that they created images in their minds about what they read. The creation of images was an important element for the tacit appliers in developing understanding of what was read. A teacher requesting such an exercise would enhance the children's ability to think about and understand the content of assigned readings.

Another element present in the notions tacit appliers had about reading and reading instruction was that "things in reading were simi-

lar to social studies." What the tacit appliers meant were that the types of questions and discussion format the teacher provided during reading group sessions were very much like the questions and format established during social studies instruction. Gini explained that what she learned and used during reading sessions she employed to complete her social studies assignments. For example, Gini explained that she made comparisons of various story characters in reading and she employed the same techniques in making comparisons of the people she studied in social studies. Since the teacher attempted to make the questions asked and the format of social studies instruction similar to reading instruction the tacit appliers were able to acknowledge a relationship of reading to other curriculum areas.

THE NON-APPLIERS

The last category of reader was the non-appliers. These children were incapable of naming, defining or explaining a reading skill. In addition, the non-appliers were inept when asked to apply a specific reading skill to complete content area assignments. The teacher judged that the non-appliers made "very minimal" progress in reading during the year below actual grade level placement and one non-applier was reading two and one-half years below grade level. The non-appliers received instruction from the teacher on a one-to-one basis.

The perspectives of the non-applier were drastically different from the perspectives of the children in the other categories of readers. Below are some important elements the three non-appliers understood concerning reading and reading instruction. The ideas presented

concerning each non-appliers understanding of reading are different from each other as well as different from the other readers in the classroom. Regardless of the non-appliers' understandings of reading they were incapable of applying reading abilities to complete assignments.

One non-applier, Patti, described reading as "the time I spent with . . . reading out loud." Most of Patti's work during reading group sessions were spent reading orally to the teacher. Completing the workbook exercises were important elements in the reading process for Patti. Matt, another non-applier stated that reading was "being able to answer the questions . . . to see if I learned a lot from the story and if I understand. . . ." Shawn, the third non-applier, viewed reading as knowing the main characters of a story and writing a summary of the story.

During reading group sessions, the non-appliers discussions with the teacher about the story were the primary means of exchanging ideas. An exception to this, however, was Patti who spent most of her time reading orally to the teacher. Patti spent very little time answering or discussing questions.

Completion of the workbook exercises were very important to the non-appliers. They spent much classroom time working on the exercises the teacher presented. Although the non-appliers spent time on the workbook exercises they could not explain the purposes of the exercises or why the teacher assigned the workbook pages. Shawn was the only non-applier to be assigned extra assignments. The primary foci of of Shawn's assignments were to write a summary of a story in his own

words. Shawn viewed the extra assignments as a means of keeping him busy.

The non-appliers spent little or no time reading materials outside of the reading text assignments. The primary reason for this was the fact that the non-appliers required so much time to complete their reading assignments, text stories and workbooks. The non-appliers complained that they were unable to complete social studies assignments because the readings were too difficult or too long. Consequently, the non-appliers did not participate in social studies discussions. In fact, the non-appliers often did not attend the social studies discussion sessions. The non-appliers also claimed they did not read for recreational purposes. For example, Patti stated she never read at home nor was she read to by her parents. Likewise, Matt claimed he did not read materials outside of the assigned stories but he did indicate that he liked the teacher to read to the class. The teacher read a story or part of a story each day and Matt enjoyed the opportunity to listen to the stories.

In summary, the non-appliers had a very limited view of reading and reading instruction. The non-appliers abilities to apply what they learned was limited and they were often unable to complete minimal assignments because of their lack of reading ability.

SUMMARY

Within a classroom setting the cultural knowledge of the inhabitants as regards reading, reading skills and the application of reading abilities is shaped by the actions of the teacher, the varied

abilities of the children, and the instruction provided by the teacher. Many perspectives and understandings of reading exist within a classroom and the teacher must take into account the children's understandings when providing instruction. Providing instruction on a whole class basis or even to two or three groups is often ineffective because consideration of those children unable to apply their reading abilities are neglected. A classroom of children should be considered as a specific number of distinct individuals and not as a whole group for instructional purposes. Consequently, knowledge of children's beliefs, ideas, and actions during the acquisition and application of reading abilities will enable teachers to provide focused and differentiated instruction.

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